

Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

Ludwig van Beethoven

The Age of Beethoven coincided in large part with the Age of Napoleon. At the time it must have often seemed that Ludwig van Beethoven was wreaking as much havoc in the musical world of the early 19th century as Napoleon was in the political universe of the same time. Beethoven was enthusiastic about Napoleon at first, supposing that the Frenchman would abolish the aristocratic tyranny that reigned over Europe in favor of a more humanitarian social order. But in the spring of 1804, just as Beethoven completed his Third Symphony, intended as a symphonic tribute to Napoleon, news arrived that Napoleon had crowned himself Emperor, that the standard-bearer of republicanism had seized power as a dictator of absolutism. Beethoven's fervor collapsed, and he famously scratched Napoleon's name from the manuscript of what would from then on be dubbed the *Sinfonia eroica*.

Napoleon seemed unstoppable until 1812, when the tide began to turn. His armies were repulsed from Moscow that autumn, and in June 1813 Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, engineered a decisive victory in the Battle of Vitoria, which effectively spelled French defeat in the Iberian Peninsula. On March 31, 1814, the European allies entered Paris; a week later Napoleon abdicated to his marshals and within a month he and an entourage of a thousand loyal men began their exile on the Italian island of Elba, where Napoleon was installed as Emperor and officially ruled over the locals. Nine months later he sneaked back in an attempt to conquer France again, and his forces picked up considerable steam before being quashed for good in the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815 — after which Napoleon was sent to spend the remaining five and a half years of his life on the remote South Atlantic island of St. Helena.

Beethoven monitored all of this with great interest. On December 8, 1813, two of his works were unveiled in a concert at the University of Vienna organized for the benefit of troops wounded five weeks earlier in the Battle of Hanau: his descriptive symphonic fantasy *Wellington's Victory, or The Battle of Vitoria*, and his Seventh Symphony. In between, the audience was treated to marches (by other composers) in which the orchestra accompanied a mechanical trumpet-playing machine, the creation of Johann Mälzel, better remembered as the inventor of the metronome. Both of Beethoven's pieces were warmly received — as indeed was the mechanical trumpeter — so much so that the program was repeated four days later as a second benefit. The second movement of the symphony had to be enclosed on both occasions.

The Seventh became one of Beethoven's most popular symphonies, and it evoked admiring comment from a who's who of people who should know — beginning with

In Short

Born: probably on December 16, 1770 (he was baptized on the 17th), in Bonn, then an independent electorate of Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: 1811 through April 13, 1812; dedicated to Count Moritz von Fries

World premiere: December 8, 1813, at the University of Vienna, with Beethoven conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 18, 1843, Ureli Corelli Hill, conductor; this marked the US Premiere

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: March 27, 2019, Jaap van Zweden, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 36 minutes

Beethoven himself. In an 1815 letter to the impresario Johann Peter Salomon, he cited the “Grand Symphony in A” as “one of my best works.” Richard Wagner proclaimed it “the Apotheosis of the Dance; the Dance in its highest condition; the happiest realization of the movements of the body in an ideal form.” Vincent d’Indy objected that “in the rhythm of the first movement there is certainly nothing dance-like; it seems rather as if inspired by the song of a bird” — and, putting aside Wagner’s famous characterization, one may find that d’Indy was onto something. Wagner was also struck by the Seventh Symphony’s extremes of expression:

But compare the roughness of the opening and the concluding movements of this work with the grace, loftiness, and

even deep devotional feeling of its middle sections, and we are presented with similar puzzling contrasts to those so often found in Beethoven’s life, where, in his journals and letters, we find religious and personal appeals to God worthy of one of the Hebrew Psalmists, side by side with nicknames and jokes which befit a harlequin.

Hector Berlioz, noting that the symphony’s *Allegretto* was its most famous movement, proclaimed, “This does not arise from the fact that the other three parts are any less worthy of admiration; far from it.”

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

At the Premiere

Following the premiere of the Seventh Symphony, Beethoven penned a letter to be printed in the *Wiener Zeitung*, though he seems not to have sent it. He began:

I esteem it to be my duty to thank all the honored participants in the concert given on December 8, and 12, for the benefit of the sick and wounded Austrian and Bavarian soldiers who fought in the battle at Hanau, for their demonstrated zeal on behalf of such a noble end. It was an unusual congregation of admirable artists wherein every individual was inspired by the single thought of contributing something by his art for the benefit of the fatherland, and who without consideration of their rank cooperated in subordinate places in the excellent execution of the whole.

It was indeed “an unusual congregation of admirable artists.” Ignaz Schuppanzigh, Beethoven’s portly, long-suffering friend whose string quartet introduced all of the composer’s mature quartets, sat concertmaster, and the guitarist Mauro Giuliani played cello. The composers Giacomo



Meyerbeer, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, and Ignaz Moscheles all helped out as percussionists in *Wellington’s Victory*, with Antonio Salieri (who served as secondary conductor) cuing them and the artilleryists, who discharged firearms to lend authenticity to the battle scene.

Battle of Hanau, by
Émile Jean-Horace Vernet, 1826